

History of the Piasa Bird

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By
John William Gibbons

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History of THE PIASA BIRD

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JOHN WILLIAM GIBBONS



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TRACING THE FATE OF THE
PETROGLYPH KNOWN BY THIS NAME
FROM ITS EARLIEST MENTION
TO THE PRESENT DAY

Here's something to read up
on so you'll be a well
informed visitor when you come
to Alton.

Johnny



THE PIASA BIRD

This is the Piasa Bird as it was repainted on the bluff at Alton in 1952. The dimensions of this painting are thirty feet long by sixteen feet high. As can be seen, this painting is made up of the characteristics of very many animals. The skillful use of vivid colors also adds to the fierceness of the painting. Located at the Alton end of the McAdams Memorial Highway, the Piasa Bird is an object of interest for all visitors to Alton.

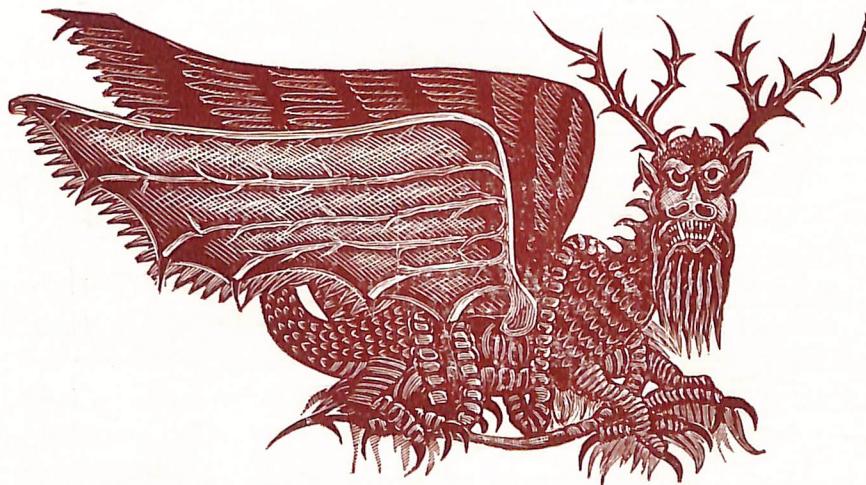
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Published by
THE OUATOGA SOCIETY
Alton, Illinois

1955

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INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the purpose of this paper, that is, to trace the fate of the petroglyph known as the Piasa Bird, one should first become acquainted with the theories concerning the origin of the image of this bird. The image of the bird, as originally located, was on a bluff of the Mississippi River not far above the present city of Alton, Illinois.

Doctor H. W. Long, a World War I veteran, offers the first solution to the problem of explaining just how the bird came to be on the bluff. While on travels in France during the war, he found a wooden model of a creature of mixed characteristics in a museum in Poitiers. Knowing about the Piasa Bird, he noticed the striking similarity between this French model and the American bird. This French model was called "Le Grande Geule," which means "The Big Glutton." This model was made during an epidemic in 1640 by the people of Poitiers to appease the devil.

Doctor Long offers this hypothesis. Father Marquette's party, contracting some terrible disease, made the painting of the Piasa for the same reason that the Poitiers model was made. Doctor Long gives credit to the French for the Piasa for several reasons. First, they knew about "Le Grande Geule." Secondly, they understood the use of durable paint pigments, whereas the Indians lacked this knowledge. In the third place, because of the great height of the Piasa, Doctor Long finds that the French used their knowledge about ladders and rigging, whereas again the Indians lacked the necessary knowledge. Besides this, Doctor Long asserts that the Indians did not have the imagination to think up such a creature as the Piasa.¹

The second, and commonly accepted theory, is that which is given in the Indian legend connected with this bird. The legend in brief is as follows:

Many years ago a huge and fearsome creature began to

1. Doctor H. W. Long, "Model of the Piasa Bird Is Found in French Museum," *Illinois State Historical Society Journal*, XVIII (October, 1925), 721-725. The preceding two paragraphs are paraphrased from this work.

carry off members of that tribe of Indians called the Illinois. Whole villages were depopulated. One night Ouatoga, a brave chief of this tribe, had a dream. In this dream the Great Spirit gave him a plan by which he could kill the man-eating creature which the Indians called the Piasa. The next day Ouatoga selected twenty brave warriors. He placed them in ambush on the top of a high cliff. Each warrior was equipped with a poisoned arrow. Ouatoga offered himself as a victim for the Piasa. The bird swooped down, but just as he was about to grasp Ouatoga, the warriors shot their arrows. The Piasa fell dead. Ouatoga was unhurt and the tribe was saved. In memory of this great event in their nation's history, the Indians carved the image of the Piasa on the smooth face of the bluff on which Ouatoga had stood.² As was mentioned before, this is the theory commonly accepted by the people of the region.

Pere Charleviox (1720) believes that the paintings came about through a caprice of nature. He says that the Indians of the region noticed that this section of the bluff had a resemblance to a beast or man. They improved upon this rude representation so that they could use it as an august manitou to which they could make offerings whenever passing the spot.³

These then are a few of the theories which have been put forth in explanation of how the petroglyph known as the Piasa Bird came to be on the bluffs of the Mississippi River. One author, commenting on the number of names found marked on one of the birds, says that the pictures have been so marked "from the time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary."⁴ From this brief consideration of some of the theories about the origin of the Piasa Bird, it is now possible to begin to trace the fate of this bird.

2. Taken from *Alton Evening Telegraph*, Centennial Edition, January 15, 1936, p. 6.

3. Context taken from Agnes Repplier, *Pere Marquette* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1929), p. 160.

4. Lewis F. Thomas and J. C. Wild, *The Valley of the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Joseph Garnier, Publisher, 1948), p. 71.

I

Many travelers are impressed by the scenic beauty to be found along the banks of the Mississippi. Especially inspiring are the long ranges of bluffs. One of these ranges of bluffs starts at the city of Alton, Illinois, and extends for miles up the Mississippi on the Illinois side of the river. In complete contrast to the nearly perpendicular walls of rock on the Illinois side are the flat prairies of Missouri. Just off the west end pavement of West Broadway in the city of Alton, there is an unusually large bluff projection. This huge mass of stone is an object of interest for all visitors to Alton, not only for its size, but also for the image of a bird which is painted on it. Since this bluff projection is at the Alton end of the McAdams Memorial Highway, many people can easily see the large image of the bird known as the Piasa Bird.⁵ In succeeding pages the very interesting fate of this unusual figure will be traced from its earliest mention up to the present time.

Pere Marquette gave to the world the first official record of the Piasa. He saw the figures of this creature in his descent of the Mississippi to the Missouri River in August of 1673. However, his account was not made known until 1681, when it was published in Paris in his *Discoveries of the Mississippi*. He writes:

Passing the mouth of the Illinois River, we soon fell into the shadow of a tall promontory and with great astonishment beheld the representations of two monsters painted on the lofty limestone front. . . . They are as large as a calf, with heads and horns like a goat; and face like a man's. Their tails are so long that they pass over their heads and between their legs under their bodies, ending like a fish's tail. They are painted red, green, and black. (They are) an object of Indian worship.⁶

5. This is the name given to the figures by the Indians. It means "the bird that devours men." This name was once spelled Peasayah, but has since been corrupted to Piasa. *Alton Evening Telegraph*, loc. cit., pp. 6, 7.

6. Mrs. Clara Kern Bayliss, "The Significance of the Piasa," Illinois State Historical Society *Transactions* (1908), p. 115.

If one considers this vivid and detailed description of Father Marquette, it will be a simple matter to obtain an idea as to what the figures looked like in 1673. In the first place, the fact that Father Marquette mentions two figures is of special note, since, as will be seen, subsequent explorers speak of only one image. In order to aptly describe these creatures, Father Marquette compares certain parts of the creatures to different animals. In this one passage, he mentions a calf in connection with the size of the figures, a goat, in order to give an idea of how the head and horns looked, a tiger's beard and a man's face to approximate the facial aspect of the images, and a fish's tail to describe the appearance of the end of the Piasa's tail.

It is no wonder that Marquette and his companions "were at first much alarmed at these strange specimens of native art. . . ." Maybe Father Marquette was more impressionable than men of today, but "these Frenchmen were treading an unknown wilderness, filled with dangers of many sorts which excited their imagination to a high pitch."⁷ This last statement also is the argument advanced by one writer in order to cover the possibility that Father Marquette exaggerated in his account.

Father Marquette was an experienced explorer and knew the value of a sketch of something so unusual. However, his original sketch has been lost. A few years later, a map, decorated with figures very similar to those described by Father Marquette, was made by order of the intendant Duchesneau. Francis Parkman, the historian, claimed that these figures were probably copied from Marquette's drawing. His claim, however, met very definite opposition from William McAdams, an eminent geologist of the State of Illinois. McAdams, after securing a copy of the map, stated that he could "not agree with the historian in believing that it (the figures on the map) answers to Marquette's description or refers to the well-known figure that

7. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Father Marquette* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), p. 196. Context from this work.

once adorned the bluffs of Alton.”⁸ It is evident, then, that no one will ever know what Father Marquette’s drawing actually looked like, but his description of the monsters as they appeared to him in 1673 will continue to exist.

The Indians of the region had the Piasa all to themselves until white men once more visited the bluffs in 1680. On April 24th of that year, the Recollect Louis Hennepin passed by the bluff and saw the image.⁹ Eighteen years later, in 1698, his account was published in his *New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*. Instead of a bird, however, Father Hennepin wrote that he saw the figure of a “horse and some other beasts painted in red upon a very steep rock. . . .” The question arises at this point as to whether Father Hennepin is actually talking about the same figure that Father Marquette described. The solution rests in the words of Father Hennepin. He described the location of this image by citing an important battle in the history of the Indians. He continues by writing that “since that time the Savages going by the rock used to smoke and offer tobacco to the beasts. . . .”¹⁰

This statement coincides with what Father Marquette wrote in his account, that is, that the images were “an object of Indian worship.”¹¹ This is one indication that Father Hennepin is talking about the same figures, even though he thinks they look more like a horse than a bird. Father Hennepin also mentions only one color as opposed to Father Marquette’s three. These men agree, however, that one of the colors of the images was red.

Seven years after Louis Hennepin passed by the rock, another Recollect priest came to the spot. This was Anastasius Douay, who reached the bluff some time between August 26 and September 5, 1687.¹² Douay thought that

8. Frederick E. Voelker, “The Piasa,” Illinois State Historical Society *Journal*, VII (April, 1914), 83. Paraphrase and verbatim from this source.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 115. This footnote refers to material quoted since the preceding footnote.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 84.

Father Marquette exaggerated in his description of the images. One author "thinks . . . (that it is) entirely possible that Douay . . . (was) right in saying that (Father) Marquette's description of the Piasa was exaggerated, although Douay was bitterly hostile to the Jesuits."¹³ Douay's hostility to the Jesuits may indeed account for his charge of exaggeration.

The last record of this early period concerning the Piasa was made by a Jesuit, Pere Jean Francois de St. Cosmē. One author gives his own American interpretation to the more clumsy original language of de St. Cosmē.

On the 6th of December, 1699, we (St. Cosmē and his party) embarked on the Mississippi. After making about twenty-one miles—which is nearly the equivalent of six leagues—we found the Missouri River. At three or four leagues . . . we found on the left a rock having some figures painted on it, for which, it is said, the Indians have some veneration. They are now almost effaced.¹⁴

This passage is important for several reasons. First, it shows that St. Cosmē actually did see a rock on which there were figures. Then again, vital information is given about the location of this painted rock. St. Cosmē places the distance of the bluff at "about from eleven to fourteen miles" above the point where the Missouri River empties into the Mississippi. He states that it was "on the left" that he saw the rock. This would be quite impossible, since there are no bluffs on the left side of the river at this point. Undoubtedly one must take into consideration St. Cosmē's position in the canoe as he proceeds up the river. Finally, St. Cosmē says that the images were "almost effaced."¹⁵ He enlarges upon this by further stating that "incessant rains had dimmed and blurred the colors. . . ."¹⁶ Thus it can be seen that even at this early date the elements of nature were beginning to gradually erase the figures.

13. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 114.

14. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 85.

15. *Ibid.* All material quoted verbatim in this paragraph is from this source.

16. Repplier, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

This, then, is the testimony of the man in this first period. From the statements of Father Marquette, and the other men cited in this section, it is possible for one to conclude that there actually were figures carved or painted on a lofty cliff on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. Father Marquette's description provides one with a good idea as to how the figures looked in 1673. Then, only 23 years later, St. Cosmé gives a very definite indication that the figures were beginning to show signs of erasure because of the elements.

II

Wind, rain, snow, and sleet buffeted this bluff for over a century before the next written account was made concerning the condition of the images. However, before one can speak of the condition of the images, one must first be sure that they were still on the bluff after so many years had elapsed.

Joseph Gillespie, who visited the spot in 1823, did not think that there was anything on the cliff which would resemble the figure of a bird.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Hon. P. A. Armstrong asserts that, in his time, there were still "petroglyphs of two monsters. . . ."¹⁸ When A. D. Jones visited the bluff in 1838, there were no longer two monsters, but only one.¹⁹ From this testimony, and the statements of the other men in this period, one can see that the figures were still on the bluff even after a lapse of over one hundred years.

As was stated before, no written account concerning the condition of the images was made until the early years of the nineteenth century. This does not necessarily mean, however, that written accounts were not made during this time; it simply means that these accounts were not published in any permanent form.²⁰

17. John Reynolds, *The Pioneer History of Illinois* (Chicago Fergus Printing Company, 1887), p. 27, n.

18. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 117.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

20. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 86.

In the years from 1804 to 1846/7 many changes took place on the painted bluff. First, the figures gradually faded away until only slight traces remained.²¹ Then Nature, ever molding and changing the geography of the land, destroyed one of the figures.²² Finally the whole bluff was quarried away about the middle of the century, and the images were completely annihilated.²³

Major Amos Stoddard is credited with the first statement as to the condition of the figures at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The year in which he visited the bluff is uncertain, although it is believed to have been sometime between the years 1804 and 1812. The latter date, 1812, is maintained by Reuben Gold Thwaites as the more correct date.

The actual date is not as important as what Major Stoddard had to say about the Piasa. He commented that "what they call the Painted Monsters . . . still remain in a good state of preservation."²⁴ This statement presents some difficulty, for it is not readily seen just what Major Stoddard means by "a good state of preservation."²⁵ Then again, it must be remembered that St. Cosmē wrote in 1699 that the figures were already then "almost effaced."²⁶ The figures must necessarily have aged over the hundred and five years between the visits of St. Cosmē and Major Stoddard. Yet, in order to make a statement regarding the condition of the images, Major Stoddard must have seen them. One may conclude, then, that the figures were still on the bluff at this time.

From the statements of all the men who have been cited so far in this paper, it is clear that they at least admitted that there were figures painted on the bluff. At this point, however, a very definite statement to the contrary is made by Joseph Gillespie, who visited the spot in 1823,

21. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 117.

22. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 90.

23. William McAdams, *Records of Ancient Races In The Mississippi Valley* (St. Louis: C. R. Barns Publishing Co., 1887), p. 9.

24. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 86.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

but who did not express his views in written form until January 25, 1883, sixty years after his visit. He wrote:

I saw what was called the picture sixty years since (in 1823), long before it was marred by quarrymen or the tooth of time, and I never saw anything that would have impressed my mind that it was intended to represent a bird. I saw daubs of coloring matter that I suppose exuded from the rocks that might, to very impressible people, bear some resemblance to a bird or a dragon, after they were told to look at it in that light, just as we fancy in certain arrangements of the stars we see animals. . . .²⁷

This passage is apparently contrary to what the preceding men have stated. In the above passage, Mr. Gillespie writes that he saw the images "long before (they were) . . . marred by . . . the tooth of time. . . ." The period from Father Marquette, 1673, to Joseph Gillespie, 1823, is one hundred and fifty years. It would seem likely that "the tooth of time" had had a sufficient number of years in which to work in this period of time.

Mr. Gillespie also wrote that he saw "daubs of coloring matter" although he explains their presence on this lofty cliff by saying that they "exuded from the rocks" His comparison of certain arrangements of the stars to the figures the early explorers saw is noteworthy except for the fact that he gives no definite example of any arrangements of stars.²⁸

His visit to the bluffs was not altogether fruitless, for he did see "the marks of the bullets shot by the Indians against the rocks in the vicinity of that so-called picture." But again, he did not understand why the Indians would do something like this.

Joseph Gillespie not only rejects the painting itself, but also speaks against the legend popularly connected with

27. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 27, n. The information contained in the preceding two paragraphs is from the footnote found in this work.

28. *Ibid.* This footnote covers the material quoted verbatim in the preceding two paragraphs.

this painting. In fact, he does not "think that the story had its origin among the Indians or was one of their superstitions, but was introduced to the literary world by John Russel . . who wrote a beautiful story about it."²⁹ John Russel will be treated later in this period. From Joseph Gillespie's statement one is able to see that everyone did not agree that there actually were images on the bluff. All still agree, however, that there was something there.

William McAdams provides the information as to the next record of the images. He speaks of a sketch of the figures, beneath which is inscribed in ink the words "made by William Dennis, April 3, 1825." This inscription is made not only in letters but also in figures. The caption of this manuscript is made up of the words "Flying Dragon."³⁰ One concludes from the date on this sketch that William Dennis was the next person to see the bluff, for in order to make a sketch of something, one must first have seen the original.³¹

Closely following William Dennis is the Hon. P. A. Armstrong. About the year 1827 this gentleman obtained a legend from the Miamis concerning the Piasa Bird. Accompanying this legend there was a complete description of the figures. This material, however, was not published until sixty years later, 1887.³²

Armstrong wrote that "there were petroglyphs of two monsters, not exactly alike, cut into the bluish grey sandstone overlying the limestone which (Father) Marquette mentions. . . ." Here then is a definite statement that the figures were still on the bluff, and also that there were two of these images. Armstrong also enlarges upon the type of rock in which the figures were carved, since he gives the color of the sandstone as "bluish grey."³³

A very important aspect of the petroglyphs, which has

29. *Ibid.*

30. "'Dragon' or 'Flying Dragon' was the common name for it (the image on the bluff) before Russel's story of the Piasa came out." McAdams *op. cit.*, p. 8.

31. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 86.

32. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 115.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 117. Material quoted in preceding paragraph from this source.

been neglected by all previous writers, is the dimensions of the figures. Armstrong states that the figures "were in horizontal line, heads east . . . (and were also) thirty feet long and twelve feet high. . . ."³⁴ Besides giving the size of the figures, this quotation also tells in which direction the figures faced. Except for Father Marquette's statement that the figures were "as large as a calf,"³⁵ these are the only dimensions that have been given up to this point. Armstrong, moreover, thinks that Father Marquette failed to take into consideration the distance of his canoe from the bluff, thus underestimating their size.³⁶

Concerning the images themselves, Armstrong gives a few more details which have as yet not been discussed. He thinks that the wings are "those of a bat, but shaped like an eagle's. . . ." The feet of the images are also "supplied with claws like an eagle's. . . ." Armstrong further writes that these figures "were quite distinct when white people first settled in the locality, and that traces of them remained until the rock was quarried away. . . ."³⁷

The first point to be settled with regard to this statement is when the first white people settled in the locality. It is known that as early as 1783, settlers were making their homes in this region.³⁸ Since Armstrong says that "traces . . . remained until the rock was quarried away . . . ,"³⁹ one knows that the marks of the images were still on the bluff from 1800 until the middle of the century. One conjecture as to how the figures were able to be carved so high on the bluff is given by the Hon. P. A. Armstrong. He thinks that there was a slope of talus at the base of the cliff. The constant movement of the Mississippi River gradually wore this slope away, until nothing remained but the perpendicular face of the bluff.⁴⁰

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

37. *Ibid.* This footnote covers all material quoted in this paragraph.

38. Greater Alton Association of Commerce, "Greater Alton, Illinois," January 1, 1954.

39. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 117.

40. *Ibid.*

The people of the locality were well acquainted with the figure of the Piasa, but it was not until John Russel wrote his "Tradition of the Piasa," for an eastern magazine that the general public found out about the unusual petroglyph.⁴¹ Concerning the actual date of John Russel's visit to the bluff, one writer claims that "in March, 1836 . . . (he) visited the locality of the painted bluff . . . (and) in July of that same year (he wrote his account)."⁴² On the other hand, another writer asserts that Russel visited the cliff in March, 1848, and in July of that year he wrote his account.⁴³

If one holds that John Russel was at the spot in 1836, there is no difficulty. But if the year 1848 is to be maintained as the correct date, there must be some explanation as to what year the cliff was quarried away, for a reliable source places the destruction of the cliff between the years 1846 and 1847.⁴⁴ John Russel surely couldn't have seen the figures if the bluff was quarried away before he got there.

When William McAdams asked John Russel about his story, Russel "answered that there was a somewhat similar tradition among the Indians, but he admitted, to use his own words, that the story was 'somewhat illustrated'."⁴⁵

Regardless of what date is adopted for John Russel's visit to the bluff, it is certain that A. D. Jones was there in June of 1838. By this time there was only one figure remaining. Whereas before this time the Indians used to shoot arrows at the figures on the bluff, now, since they were better equipped because of the coming of white men, they shot rifles whenever passing the bluff. Jones comments

41. John Russel is further identified as "a whilom professor of Greek and Latin at Shurtleff College, in Upper Alton." McAdams, *op. cit.* p. 1. However, when asked about John Russel by the writer of this paper, the librarian of the college replied that "though we have consulted all our records back to 1827, when the college began, we find no listing of a John Russel, either as professor or tutor." From letter sent by Mrs. J. B. Hall, February 1, 1954, concerning the name of the eastern magazine for which John Russel wrote his account, one author states that his material was "published in the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* of Utica, N.Y. . . ." Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 117.

42. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 86.

43. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 116.

44. McAdams, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

11

that already in 1838 there were "ten thousand bullet marks on the cliff . . ." which for him verified the tradition of the neighborhood.⁴⁶ One must understand that this number is only an estimate of the actual number of marks on the cliff, since it would be quite impossible to count the exact number.

The last actual record which was made of the images before a quarry was established at the site is found in an old German publication, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*. When this book was published in 1839, it contained a sketch of the bluff and of the figures on the bluff. This sketch is believed to be the most satisfactory picture of the Piasa Bird. The account which accompanies this sketch tells of the Indian tradition and says that the figures were "growing dim and showed evidence of great age."⁴⁷ This great masterpiece of America's aboriginal artists was fading because of the consistent wear of the elements.

In the sketch found in the German publication there is a second figure to the rear of the first. A ragged crevice is also shown, partially obliterating the second figure. It is supposed that part of the bluff's face fell and nearly destroyed the second figure.⁴⁸ This is why A. D. Jones only saw one figure.

Progress and the advance of civilization finally took their toll. The huge majestic mass of stone was quarried away in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the image of the Piasa crumbled into dust after countless years of existence. The actual date of the destruction is between the years 1846 and 1857. William McAdams, Illinois State geologist who lived at Alton, places the destruction sometime between 1846 and 1847.⁴⁹ Since he was a geologist, one can be sure that he had good reasons for adopting this date. On the other hand, the *Alton Evening Telegraph* claims that the bluff was blasted away in 1857 in order

46. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 116. This footnote covers the material found in the preceding paragraph. A. D. Jones gave his observations and gleanings to posterity in his book called *Illinois and the West*. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 89.

47. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 90.

48. *Ibid.*

49. McAdams, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

to obtain rock ballast needed in the construction of a railroad.⁵⁰ If one does not accept this date as the true date, he at least finds a reason why the bluff should have been quarried away in the first place. Regardless of whether one accepts the former or the latter date, it is certain that the figures were forever lost in the clouds of rock dust that went up right after the blast that destroyed the cliff.

From "a good state of preservation" in 1804,⁵¹ to the blotting out of one of the figures by a landslide of rock just prior to 1839,⁵² and the actual and complete destruction of the face of the bluff in the middle of the century,⁵³ one gets an overall picture of the fate of the bird in this period. That is, one sees the gradual decline of the images until they were completely gone.

The memory of the Piasa lived on in the minds of the people of the locality. Parkman, the historian, "was amused by the proposal of some enthusiasts in his day to repaint the figures as described by Pere Marquette." The project finally had to be abandoned because of the great difficulty of the task. When Parkman again passed the spot in 1867, a huge harmless advertisement of "Plantation Bitters" adorned the cliff formerly venerated by the Indians.⁵⁴ Thus this early attempt to produce the Piasa on the bluff failed.

III

Although the early plans for the restoration of the images had to be abandoned, the people of Alton refused to let the Piasa Bird and the legend connected with the bird die altogether. It was not, however, until the early part of the twentieth century that the image of the Piasa was repainted on a bluff just outside of the city limits of

50. *Alton Evening Telegraph*, March 17, c. 1950.

51. Voelker, *loc. cit.*, p. 86.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

53. McAdams, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

54. Reppplier, *op. cit.*, p. 160. This footnote covers all verbatim and paraphrase in this paragraph.

Alton, Illinois, along the McAdams Memorial Highway. This was in 1925.⁵⁵

This first reproduction remained on the bluff for a quarter of a century before it too was destroyed by quarrymen sometime between 1950 and 1951. This time, however, the quarrying was necessary. The Piasa Bird was again restored by a commercial sign company in August of 1952.⁵⁶

Mr. Herbert J. Whittleman, Scoutmaster of a local Boy Scout Troop, received most of the credit for the 1925 reproduction of the Piasa. He "was the guiding influence in securing money from downtown businessmen for scaffolding, rock chipping, and cliff surfacing."⁵⁷ Alton's businessmen responded generously to Mr. Whittleman's plea for enough funds to assure the success of the project.

After the money was raised, Mr. Herb Forcade, Assistant Scoutmaster of the Troop, began extensive research on the colors to be used in the painting. He decided that besides the other necessary colors, "four shades of green,"⁵⁸ should be used in the reproduction. With the necessary financial backing, as well as considerable knowledge as to what colors would be best to use, Herb Forcade was ready to paint.

A massive projection of rock, called Lover's Leap from an Indian legend connected with it, was chosen as a suitable site for the new painting. This huge projection stood "at a point west of the end of West Broadway paving. . . ." The Piasa was painted on a smooth section of this bluff, "about 40 feet or so up from the roadway."⁵⁹ Thus, because of the enthusiasm of Scoutmaster Whittleman and the artistry of Assistant Scoutmaster Herb Forcade, as well as the financial backing of Alton's businessmen, the Piasa Bird again looked out over the broad Mississippi from its high perch.

The citizens of Alton were familiar with the Piasa

55. Letter from Mr. William F. Downs, February 8, 1954.

56. Letter from Mr. William D. Brunner, February 12, 1954.

57. Downs, *loc. cit.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. Alton Evening Telegraph, March 17, c. 1950. This footnote covers all the quoted material so far in this paragraph.

Bird, not only because it was now painted on Lover's Leap, but also because many business, civic, and social groups used the name in their titles. The local Boy Scouts were called the Piasa Bird Council of the Boy Scouts of America. Even one of the streets in downtown Alton was called Piasa Street because it followed "the route of the original Piasa Creek which emptied into the Mississippi."⁶⁰

The 1925 reproduction weathered the wear of the elements, but could do nothing against Progress. About 1949 it was decided that Lover's Leap would have to be blasted away as a safety measure "to widen the McAdams Memorial Highway right-of-way and eliminate a 'blind curve'."⁶¹ This was only twenty-five years after the first reproduction had been made.

The actual quarrying, however, was not completed until sometime between the years 1950 and 1951.⁶² The delay was caused because certain property right details had to be cleared up before work could be continued. When the job was finished, the bluff's face was set back almost thirty feet. The employees of the Mississippi Lime Company, who did the work, left the remaining face of the bluff smooth and slanted in slightly at the bottom.⁶³

When it had first been decided to set Lover's Leap back, O. W. Maguire, the owner of a commercial sign company, offered "to paint the Horrible Harpy of Hop Hollow on the bluffs. . . ." After the local newspaper had printed Mr. Maguire's statement, public interest focused on the Piasa Bird. This interest was further stirred when Mr. Maguire made it known that he wanted "a bird that . . . (would) attract favorable attention and . . . (would) be an advertisement for the city."⁶⁴

Public opinion was divided as to what would be a suitable type of bird. At the time one school of thought

60. Downs, *loc. cit.* This footnote covers all material in this paragraph.

61. *Alton Evening Telegraph*, March 17, c. 1950.

62. Brunner, *loc. cit.*

63. *Alton Evening Telegraph*, November 30, 1949.

64. *Ibid.* This footnote covers all the material in this paragraph.

favored "the aboriginal type of Piasa Bird. . . ." This was the type of bird that Father Marquette had seen. This school of thought believed that Father Marquette's Piasa Bird was the only one that rightfully had "historical significance." At this time the fate of the more correct version of the Piasa was to be decided.

The "historical" opinion was not shared by another group of men in the city. This opposing group did not think that the aboriginal type of Bird was interesting enough "to attract the attention of visitors." This, then, was the motive for discarding the historical Piasa Bird, in favor of "the more elaborate king-sized version. . . ." This "deluxe model" was known to the people of Alton because it had been pictured "on the old Piasa Brand canned goods."⁶⁵

When the time came for the new Piasa Bird to be painted on the bluff, a committee of the Alton Area Historical Society selected the picture of the Piasa which had been made by William Dennis in 1825, and a copy of which William McAdams had sent to the Smithsonian Institute at Washington.⁶⁶ This settled any dispute as to the type of bird to be repainted.

In September of 1952, John M. Buese, O. W. Maguire's artist, repainted the Piasa Bird on the bluff. He was assisted by two other employees of the company, Mr. Eldon Grove and Mr. Ralph Owens. Three men were necessary for this work because the finished painting was to be "30 ft. long by 16 ft. high . . . (and) 36 ft. above the ground."⁶⁷

Father Marquette and Father Hennepin both mentioned red as one of the colors used in the original figures.⁶⁸ Now, over two centuries after these missionaries had seen the images, red was again used. However, this red paint, a lead base paint, was used as the prime coat. White paint was next applied and the bird itself was then painted. This Piasa Bird as painted in 1952 will last indefinitely, although

65. *Ibid.* This footnote covers all material, both paraphrase and verbatim, in the last two paragraphs.

66. *Alton Evening Telegraph*, March 17, c. 1950.

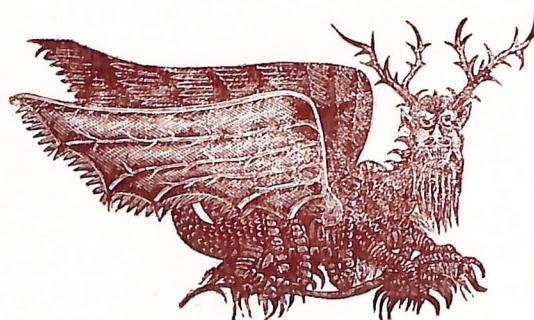
67. Letter from Mr. O. W. Maguire, February 18, 1954.

68. Bayliss, *loc. cit.*, p. 115.

the sign company recommended that the figure be touched up about every five years.⁶⁹

This then is the complete fate of the Piasa Bird. The original petroglyphs were seen and written about in very descriptive terms by Father Marquette in 1673. Over a hundred years later, Major Stoddard, A. D. Jones, and others saw the fading traces of the petroglyphs. Then, in the middle of the century, the famous images were forever destroyed by quarrymen. After a lapse of over 75 years, in 1925, the horrible image was reproduced. This painting weathered all the forces of nature, but again the advance of civilization brought its destruction. After the Mississippi Lime Company had finished its quarrying job sometime between 1950 and 1951, the Piasa Bird was again restored. It is on the bluff today, for all future generations to see.

69. Maguire, *loc. cit.* This footnote covers all paraphrase in this paragraph.



APPENDIX

Letters Written to the Writer of This Paper Containing Material on the Piasa Bird

February 1, 1954:

I am very sorry to inform you that though we have consulted all our records back to 1827 when the college began, we find no listing of John Russel, either as professor or tutor. The story of the Piasa Bird has always been attributed to Indian legend around this vicinity and dates back to when the city of Alton was founded. To hear that the story was not originated until the 1800's is quite a surprise!

Mrs. J. B. Hall,
Librarian of
Shurtleff College

February 8, 1954:

Concering the painting—the first painting was made in 1925 by Mr. Herbert Forcade. Mr. Forcade was Assistant Scoutmaster of a Troop sponsored by the Horace Mann School.

The Scoutmaster of the Troop, Herbert J. Whittleman, was the man who was the guiding influence in securing money from downtown businessmen for scaffolding, rock chipping, and cliff surfacing.

The money was raised and Mr. Forcade conducted some research on the colors of the Piasa Bird. Four shades of green were used.

This painting was blasted away to make room for the McAdams Highway, and several years ago the Maguire Sign Co. painted a new Piasa Bird in several colors. I assume that several interested parties took care of any financial obligations.

The legend of the Piasa is preserved by many organizations incorporating the name in their title: the local Boy Scout Council, a city street, business, and civic and social groups. Piasa Street through downtown Alton follows the original Piasa Creek which emptied into the Mississippi. A storm sewer is now under Piasa Street. A small stream emptying into the Mississippi several miles (about three) above Alton bears the name of Piasa Creek.

William F. Downs
Field Scout Executive
Piasa Bird Council
Boy Scouts of America

February 10, 1954:

The bird was repainted on the bluff at Lover's Leap in August, 1952. The previous painting was removed with the section of the bluff that projected under Lover's Leap when the McAdams River Road was widened at that point. The present painting is, by far, the most expertly done. It is thirty feet long. It was done by a commercial sign company which donated the time and labor. The reproduction is of the "deluxe" model.

William D. Brunner,
Alton Evening Telegraph

February 18, 1954:

We are in receipt of your letter of February 13 and are glad to furnish you with what information we have in regards to the Piasa Bird.

The size of the present bird is 30 ft. long by 16 ft. high. The top of the bird is 36 ft. above the ground.

It was repainted in September of 1952. The paint would last indefinitely, although it will become dirty and should be repainted within approximately 5 years. There has been no talk of preserving it further although in all probability it will be repainted when necessary.

There was no particular problem in the scaffolding as J. J. Wuellner & Son furnished their tubular steel scaffolding for the job.

The Alton Fire Dept. furnished their truck and hose to wash the face of the bluff before the painting was started. They have continued to wash it occasionally when it becomes dirty.

A red lead base paint was used on the face of the bluff as a prime coat. This was followed by blocking out white paint and the bird itself was painted with regular outdoor bulletin enamel.

The art work was done by Mr. John M. Buese. He was assisted in the painting on the bluff by Mr. Eldon Grove and Mr. Ralph Owens—all employees of Maguire Signs.

As you probably know, the original painting was blasted away when the new road was put through between Alton and Clifton Terrace. When the blasting was completed, a natural vertical fissure was discovered and the bird was painted on that area.

Maguire Signs
O. W. Maguire



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Ouatoga Society

The Ouatoga Society was established in November, 1953, in Alton, Illinois, by a group of eleven Explorers of the Piasa Bird Council, Boy Scouts of America, for the following purposes:

1. To provide an extra-curricular program for Explorers in addition to their regular Scouting activities.
2. To promote interest and study of American Indian history, lore, crafts, and dances throughout the Piasa Bird Council.
3. To bring to the communities in the Piasa Bird Council programs and activities which will further the public's interest and appreciation of the cultural attainments of the first American.
4. To further the study of Archaeology and Anthropology.
5. To maintain a library and museum of books, records, pictures, and artifacts of the American Indian for the use of members, and restricted use of the public.

For further information, write to:

ECKFORD J. DE KAY, *Director*
THE OUATOGA SOCIETY
809 Roedale Avenue
Alton, Illinois

“Neh-Ko, Gah-Gis-Dah-Yen-Duk”



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